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ABSTRACT

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This House [Can't] Believe: Resolutional Reform in Parliamentary Debate

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Abstract:

Forensic educators stand at a pivotal point in the development of NPDA debate culture and standards; we have enough experience behind us to see where NPDA is going, but not so much "tradition" as to enslave us to the past. One area of reform that is highlighted by this paper is the removal of the traditional phrase "This House believes that" in NPDA resolutions. It is my argument that this phrase, when defined, turns the debate into one of verifying the epistemic beliefs of whatever "This House" stands for. This has the educationally detrimental consequences of precluding resolutions of value, fact, and policy from the debate realm. Easy and effective solutions are offered for rephrasing resolutions.

For: Western Forensics Association

This House [Can't] Believe: Resolutional Reform in Parliamentary Debate

Introduction

In the past five years, the National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) has experienced a phenomenal increase in participants. Many of these NPDA debate events are held at AFA sanctioned tournaments. Due to the influences of British parliamentary debate, NPDA debate resolutions and procedures often contain "traditional" elements that serve little logical function. From my experience as a NPDA parliamentary debater and as a coach, I find particular problems with the inclusion of the "traditional or "historical" phrase "This House believes that..." at the start of many NPDA resolutions (Branham, 1991). This paper will argue that the presence of "This House believes that..." leads to definitional inconsistency and illogical resolutional interpretations. These problems all stem from debaters defining "This House" but not giving semantic and syntactic meaning to the words "believes that." This paper will initially describe the basic format of NPDA debate, then move on to a discussion of the logical problems posed by the phrase "This House believes that," and then examine some solutions to this problem (along with responses to some objections to these solutions).

NPDA Debate Format

NPDA parliamentary debate is similar to other forms of debate in that it involves two sides (of two debaters each) who contest the truth of a resolutional proposition in the confines of an academic setting. A major difference is that parliamentary debate focuses on extemporaneous debate; the debaters are only given 15 minutes to prepare on a specific topic before debating (Trapp, 1998). The topics that can be chosen for each round include the typical resolutions of fact, value, and policy. Another unique feature is that no printed material (newspapers, etc.) is permitted into the debate room. This has the effect of most debaters using "common knowledge" to construct arguments, and they typically provide or construct their own definitions of the resolutional terms. While the details are insignificant for the purposes of this paper, NPDA

debate uses the common elements of many other types of debate; the "government" (analogous to the "affirmative" team) seeks to convince the critic of the truth of the proposition, whereas the "opposition" (analogous to the "negative" team) attempts to falsify the proposition and the government case.

Problems Presented by "This House believes that..."

The government always begins the debate with a defense of the resolution's truth. This case should start with definitions of all key terms (Branham, 1991; Trapp, 1998). A typical NPDA resolution could be:

Resolution 1. This House believes that the U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA.

This resolution seems straightforward; the debate will center on (hopefully) the reasons for and against withdrawing from NAFTA. Thus the debated proposition (that which has evidence provided for and against within the round) is:

Proposition 1a. The U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA.

The definitions appear clear enough in our common understanding of the terms, but in many cases the government will define "This House" to be some entity or person for the purposes of narrowing the resolution and/or for providing an acting agent for some policy change. Using Resolution 1 above, the government could define "This House" to be "the U.S. government in Washington, D.C." This would serve the purpose of limiting the governmental actor (it cannot be the U.N.) and by providing an actor for the policy (the U.S. government will enact the plan to withdraw from NAFTA).

Another example involves metaphorical resolutions. Here is another topic that involves the phrase in question:

Resolution 2. This House believes that the road less traveled is more valuable.

A typical interpretation of this resolution would be to operationally define "the road less traveled" as "institute a U.S. national health care system for all citizens" (something that is not on the

"road" that U.S. policy normally travels), and to define "is more valuable" as "has more benefits than costs." The debated proposition becomes:

> Proposition 2a. Instituting a U.S. national health care system for all citizens has more benefits than costs.

The government might then attempt to give more context to the round by defining an actor into the resolution; "This House" could be defined as "the U.S. Federal Government." After these definitions, the debaters will argue about the merits and drawbacks of the U.S. Federal Government instituting a national health care system/policy for the U.S.

One may ask, What could be harmful or illogical about the defining of "This House" in a NPDA round? The harm obviously comes from ignoring the semantic/syntactic meaning of the verb "believes." If the first two words in the resolution (This House) have meaning in themselves, then why shouldn't the third word (believes)? Inconsistency is something that debaters and good reasoners should avoid (Kahane, 1992); treating some "traditional" words (This House) as possessing meaning and ignoring other "traditional" words (believes that) is *prima facie* inconsistent. Also, Ziegelmueller, Kay, and Dause (1990) argue that "...debate propositions are phrased in such a way as to correspond to the rules of grammar and syntax" (p. 26). Semantic meaning often takes the form of reference (Matthews, 1997); a word has semantic meaning if you define it by itself. On the other hand, syntactic meaning (derived from syntax) consists of internal structure of sentences and word meaning in relation to its combination with other words (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Harnish, 1995; O'Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Aronoff, 1997). If debaters begin to take the inclusion of traditional words as possessing semantic meaning, then they have to understand the syntactic meaning that words (especially verbs) must possess. Definitions and the procedure of defining words must be consistent within a proposition (Wilson, 1997).

By including the traditional words "This House" into the meaning of the resolution, the word "believes" gains important syntactic meaning. The primary verb in Resolution 1 becomes

"believes" instead of "should withdraw." This radically changes the nature of the resolution, and more importantly, the nature of the evidence *for* the resolution's truth. The resolutional focus ceases to be the hypothetical reasons *why* the U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA, and instead shifts to examining the reasons and evidence that support the U.S. government's belief in the statement "the U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA." Thus, the resolution becomes one of epistemic fact (Kahane, 1990); what does the entity *x* (who "This House" is defined as) *believe*?

Of course, debaters do not want to debate epistemic fact; they want to debate the reasons for or against such propositions as "the U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA." Once "This House" stands for something in the resolution, the word "believes that" must also stand for something or have a grammatical function. Blackburn (1996) indicates that "to believe a proposition is to hold it to be true" (p. 40). Feldman (1993) gives a operational definition of what "believes that" means: "If you conclude that a statement is true, then you believe the statement..." (p. 52). The debate should now focus on proving the truth of the resolution as defined by the government; the government must try to convince the critic that:

> Proposition 1b. The U.S. Government *believes* that the U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA.

This must be done by providing evidence that the U.S. government supports this idea of withdrawing from NAFTA.

Notice the change in the types of arguments and evidence used; no longer are the benefits and costs of Proposition 1a argued, but instead the evidence for an entity *believing* in those benefits and costs is the focus of debate (Proposition 1b). It is obvious that not all of our beliefs can be or are true; we often believe things that are based on little or no evidence (Audi, 1996). From Santa Claus to witches in Salem, our beliefs hold no necessary connection to the truth of a proposition. As Bertrand Russell argued, "The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatever that it is not utterly absurd; indeed in view of the silliness of the majority of mankind, a widespread belief is more likely to be foolish than sensible" (Denonn, p. 18, 1993).

This serves to illustrate the difference between proving *what* one believes is true (of the world, of morals, etc.) and *that* one believes something to be true. While the belief of one of my paranoid students is false (everyone is out to give me F's!), it is true that she holds that belief (her actions and statements all lead me to the fact that she believes that "everyone is out to give me F's").

By shifting the focus onto the "new" primary verb ("believes"), debaters are forced into debating what can be called a "subjective proposition of belief." This maneuver eliminates what Habermas (1984) calls "constative" propositions (statements that correctly describe the "world") and "normative" propositions (statements that advise us what we hypothetically should do). In debate specific terminology, the shift to epistemic belief propositions precludes "resolutions of value/fact" and "resolutions of policy" (Ziegelmueller, Kay, & Dause, 1990). All that is left is to argue does "This House" really believe "*x*?"

Solutions

The first and the most effective way to avoid problems associated with the defining of "traditional" words is to not include them in the resolutional wording at all. Avoiding the placement of words that could be defined would decrease the possible points of entry of abuse and inconsistency into the resolution (Ziegelmueller & Kay, 1997). NPDA resolutions are written on a tournament by tournament basis, so those individuals that construct them can leave out the phrase "This House believes that" from all resolutions. NPDA debate can still function very well without this isoteric phrase. Resolutions can be phrased in what I call the "pure propositional form" (that which is actually debated). For example, resolutions can be worded as follows:

> The U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA.
>
> Too many cooks spoil the stew.
>
> Religion is the opiate of the masses.
>
> U.N. policy is detrimental to the "third world."
>
> Human comfort is more valuable than money.

Capitalism is the root of all evil in the U.S.

These are the actual resolutions that the debaters want to debate; they vary from resolution of facts, values, to policies. By writing resolutions that coincide with their "pure propositional form" a variety of resolutions can be produced, which is very conducive to a well-rounded debate education. Also (and I believe most importantly), debaters can be taught that logic and consistency in argument/thought are highly valued in the intellectual community. Debate should strive to be as rational and logical as it can; as coaches, we have the power when writing topics to stand by these guiding ideas.

If one does not wish to see statements phrased so "bluntly," the following additions can be made while still keeping the "pure proposition" intact:

Resolved: The U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA.

Be it resolved that too many cooks spoil the stew.

Resolved: Religion is the opiate of the masses.

These additions indicate that the "pure proposition" is the subject of a formal debate, but leave almost no room for definition abuse, either intentional or unintentional. Knapp and Galizio (1999) allude to how this would solve the problem of defining "traditional words;" "...A truly careful Government team might define every term to protect itself from wily Opposition teams seeking an advantage. Some opposition teams will attempt to define "the House" as a body unsympathetic to the arguments put forth by the Government team" (p. 53). By eliminating the traditional phrase "This House believes" debate can be focused on good arguments and reason, not on bowing to illogical tactics to persevere in the game of debate.

Another solution, albeit less "certain," is for debaters themselves to treat the beginning phrase "This House believes" as purely an anachronism of tradition with no semantic and syntactic meaning. It should not be defined or treated as part of the "pure proposition" that is to be debated; it is a mere formality, like a handshake at the end of the round, that does not affect the subject of argument or the type of argument. The way the debaters situate the resolution is part of

their case arguments; "parametricizing" or choosing a specific example or case to be representative of the entire resolution occurs after the meanings of the resolution has been determined (Ziegelmueller, Kay, & Dause, 1990). If the resolution commands action on a broad scale ("This House believes that the environment should be protected"), debaters often try to define their policy actor (the Environmental Protection Agency) through "This House." Since that would lead to an undesirable debate about EPA beliefs, the debaters should instead provide definitions, and then a specific "resolutional analysis" that explains and justifies their decision to look at particular actors and particular policies.

One common objection to my analysis of the harms of "This House believes that" being present in resolutions is that this phrase represents the parliament or the all the people at the site of the debate. I find this view illogical and difficult to sustain; all one has to do is to examine what the speaker of the house (the "critic" or the "judge in parliamentary terminology) is voting for. If the speaker of the house votes for the government at the end of the round, are they saying that they are convinced "that everyone in this classroom believes that the U.S. should withdraw from NAFTA?" No, because that would mean that the debaters had polled the room, and the beliefs turned out to be homogenous.

Another related objection is that "This House" stands for the government side. This seems even more absurd because of two reasons. First, the debaters on the government side probably will not have the same beliefs as each other or as the resolution every round. Second, if they did, then the speaker of the house would have to decide in their favor every round based merely upon their testimony as to what they believe; no one could tell the government that they do not believe what they [the government] do believe (Angeles, 1992).

It appears that the previous two alternate interpretations of what "This House" could mean are not so attractive. A third, and very common, response to my arguments against the inclusion of the phrase "This House believes that" is that of "we must uphold tradition." First of all, NPDA has a unique history (tradition) dating back only to 1993/1994 when it held its first

Championship Tournament (Trapp, 1998). Additionally, NPDA differs in many respects (such as time limits, rules, typical resolutions, etc.) from foreign forms of parliamentary debate and even from other domestic organizations (American Parliamentary Debate Association, APDA). Most importantly, would we be willing to support tradition that sacrifices logical and reasoned debate? Can we consistently tell NPDA debaters that "This House" can have important semantic meaning for the debate focus, but that "believes that" has no grammatical significance? Nosich (1982) writes "Before you can even begin to figure out if a statement is true or false, you have to know what it means" (p. 60). Forensics educators cannot completely educate their students unless the importance of logic, truth, and consistency are stressed in argument. We must impress upon debaters that "...words...stand for something beyond themselves" (Engel, p. 19, 1976). If tradition is important, than debaters should respect traditional words, but not become disillusioned and believe that they are a part of the "pure proposition" that is to be debated. The rampant fact that debaters often define these terms without realizing what they do to the logical meaning of the resolution and the nature of their arguments is cause enough for this phrase to be eliminated from NPDA resolutions. In the meantime, debate educators need to enable their debaters to see what "pure proposition" lies at the heart of each resolution, and to be cognizant of what semantic meaning for "This House" does to the "pure proposition."

Conclusion

Forensic educators stand at a pivotal point in the development of NPDA debate culture and standards; we have enough experience behind us to see where NPDA is going, but not so much "tradition" as to enslave us to the past. One area of reform that has been highlighted by this paper is the removal of the phrase "This House believes that" in NPDA resolutions. It is my argument that this phrase, when defined, turns that debate into one of epistemic belief of whatever "This House" stands for. This has the educationally detrimental consequences of precluding resolutions of value, fact, and policy from the debate realm. Easy and effective solutions have been offered for this problem. Now, all that is left is for the debate community to

take an active role in the shaping of *its* future; this shall hopefully not be a future that is predetermined by traditional elements, but by the nature of reasoned argument itself.

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